

# OPENING GATES

## Access to Private Land Continues to Build

By Greg Freeman

One of the main issues challenging wildlife officials the past few years has been how to handle concerns from hunters about finding places to hunt.

"It definitely has been at the forefront," said North Dakota Game and Fish Department Director Dean Hildebrand. "It is a concern for us because we want our children and grandchildren to be able to have the same opportunities we've had. It is a challenge, but with good landowner-hunter relations we can see this through."

Part of the solution is the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen, a program through which wildlife officials have worked with landowners to open 800,000 acres of private land to hunters this fall.

Kevin Kading, Game and Fish Department private land section leader, said 100,000 acres have been added to the program in the

last year alone. "We have been aggressive in trying to meet the demands of our hunters," Kading said, while noting the Department is well ahead of reaching its goal of 1 million PLOTS acres by the end of the decade.

Challenges remain, including developing more hunter access in areas known for prime pheasant hunting. Consequently, the Department's Private Land Initiative staff is focusing its efforts on enrolling acreage in counties that traditionally meet that need. "We understand the demand for access in the more heavily populated wildlife areas, specifically pheasants," Kading said. "So we developed a priority area specifically with that in mind, and that will receive most of our attention."

The priority area covers those counties where hunters have had the highest pheasant harvest. "We have established which counties

*About 800,000 acres of the Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program will be open to hunters this fall.*

Private Land Initiative Access Acres Provided - PLOTS Program							
PROGRAM	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Working Lands Plots					4,802	285,089	347,008
CRP C/S	40,750	61,108	82,428	127,735	229,431	261,957	262,961
Habitat Plots	39,631	46,905	53,874	98,410	146,103	159,811	145,668
CREF/CoverLocks				640	7,782	13,621	13,941
Native Forest	5,414	7,728	7,728	8,991	13,585	15,598	13,726
CRP CIS Replacement				10,250	5,000	--	--
WRP		1,523	2,754	3,154			5,327
Waterbank		2,203	2,793	3,053	4,256	--	--
Beginning Farmer					1,200	1,600	2,400
Tree Planting C/S				568	1,527	2,471	2,041
Food Plots		701	695	231	1,501	4,626	685
TOTALS	85,795	120,168	149,577	253,032	415,187	745,373	*793,757
*as of July 11, 2005							

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provide hunters with the best pheasant hunting opportunities, and we will work with landowners and explain the options we have available to them in our PLI program,” Kading said.

One of those options is Working Lands, a PLI program developed in late 2003 for producers who do not necessarily want to take acreage out of production, yet have quality wildlife habitat on their property and are willing to allow public access.

Working Lands, with more than 320,000 acres in PLOTS, allows producers to work with Game and Fish to develop and sustain habitat without negatively affecting their operation. “At first glance it might not look as attractive as other parcels of land,” Kading said. “But these lands provide good hunting opportunities and there is a lot of potential to enhance or create habitat.”

The Conservation Reserve Program Cost-Sharing program has been a solid option for a number of years. Steadily increasing in acreage annually, CRP Cost-Sharing now has more than 260,000 acres in PLOTS. These tracts all contain CRP grasslands, providing wonderful habitat for many wildlife species.

CRP Cost-Share offers up to 50 percent cost-share on the price of seed for

establishing cover, and an incentive payment for maintaining cover on land enrolled in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Conservation Reserve Program.

Of major concern, however, is the number of CRP contracts awaiting expiration. In 2007, approximately 1.7 million CRP acres are set to expire in North Dakota. Of that, 93,000 acres are enrolled in the PLOTS program.

As 2007 approaches, Kading said, many producers will be looking for options. North Dakota Game and Fish private land biologists are developing programs for producers interested in leaving their expired CRP in grass as wildlife habitat. “We would like to provide an option for those producers who have CRP Cost-Share acres enrolled in our program,” Kading said. “We want to maintain the resource and keep it enrolled in PLOTS.”

While Working Lands and CRP Cost-Share have received considerable attention, the Department’s Habitat Plots program is not far behind. Nearly 150,000 acres are enrolled in this option, which provides producers with 3-6 year rentals, or 10- to 20-year contracts for newly established and/or existing cover that provides nesting, wintering or other important wildlife habitat.

## Private Land Initiative Access Acres Provided 2005 PLOTS Program

Working Lands Plots	347,008 acres
CRP Cost-sharing Plots	262,961 acres
Habitat Plots	145,668 acres
CREP/Coverlocks	13,941 acres
Native Forest Plots	13,726 acres
WRP Incentive Plots	5,327 acres
Beginning Farmer Plots	2,400 acres
Tree Planting Cost-share Plots	2,041 acres
Food Plots	685 acres

**Total Public Access Available: 793,757 acres**  
(as of July 11, 2005)

## PLI PRIORITY AREAS IN PHEASANT COUNTRY



While these three options make up most of the acreage in the PLOTS program, landowners have other options that may fit. Native Forests, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program/CoverLocks, Food Plots, Wetlands Reserve Program Incentive, Beginning Farmer and Tree Planting Cost-Share account for an additional 42,000 acres. "We have enough options to hopefully meet the needs of every landowner interested in establishing agreements with us," Kading said.

One new option is a program spawned in the North Dakota State Legislature. The House introduced a bill that will carry out an access improvement program involving leases with landowners to provide hunting access on private land. To be eligible, state funds for each lease must be supplemented by local money.

The bill overwhelmingly passed the House and Senate, and was signed by Governor John Hoeven. "What this means," Kading said, "is that the landowner still receives the normal PLOTS program payment, but communities are involved in establishing the incentive payments."

Conservation organizations are also beginning to enter the mix. The Mule Deer

Foundation's Northern Badlands Chapter has given a grant to the PLOTS program to help Game and Fish manage mule deer populations on private land.

Brandon Mason, chapter chairman in Bismarck, said the move will allow for more efficient habitat development on private land, as well as permit hunter access to obtain a more balanced mule deer harvest.

"Conceivably, we would like to provide a grant to the PLOTS program on an annual basis," he said, "with the amount based on money generated from the chapter's annual fundraising events."

While PLOTS continues to make strides toward reaching 1 million acres of private land open to hunters, Hildebrand noted the program shouldn't be a cure-all for every hunter looking for a place to hunt. "We still need for our hunters to foster relationships with landowners," he said. "The Game and Fish Department will continue to urge hunters to build relationships with those who provide habitat and have opened up their land to hunters for generations."

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*The Game and Fish Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program is one option for hunters looking for places to go hunting.*

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**GREG FREEMAN** is the Game and Fish Department's news editor.



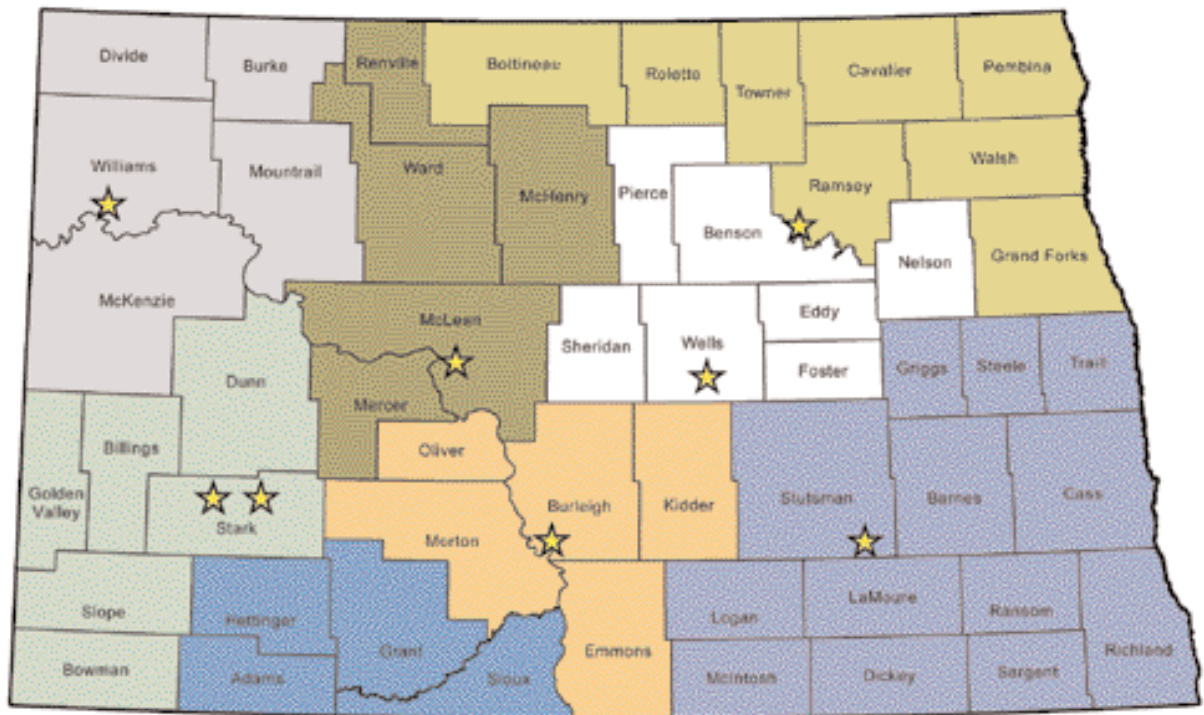
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*Working lands PLOTS are actively farmed or  
ranched, but provide quality habitat for wildlife  
and access to hunters.*



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## PLOTS DISTRICTS



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|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| - Ryan Huber, Williston<br>774-4320   | - John Bauer, Riverdale<br>654-7475        | - Caroline Littlefield, Harvey<br>324-2211 |
| - Nate Harling, Dickinson<br>227-7431 | - Brandon Mason, Bismarck<br>328-9548      | - Brian Prince, Devils Lake<br>662-3617    |
| - Ty Dressler, Dickinson<br>227-7431  | - Nathaniel Umphrey, Jamestown<br>253-6480 | ★ - PLI Field Biologists                   |

COLIN PENNER



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*Mike Szymanski, Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist, catches, bands, then releases a mourning dove as part of a three-year study.*



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